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EVIDENCE OF CIA MISSION IN ALBANIA POSSIBLY RECOVERED@

By Tom McNiff

BOSTON, Sept 28 (Reuter) - An American seeking to lay to rest a family mystery that has haunted him for decades may have unearthed evidence of a still-secret 1951 Central Intelligence Agency mission on a parched Albanian hillside.

Shaqir Kabashi, 66, says he was a CIA operative in Albania in the 1950s and that he went back to the country last month to search for the remains of his lost brother, Ibrahim Xhem Kabashi, believed killed on a mission with four other agents.

Shaqir, a retired auto worker from Williamsville, New York, told Reuters he found a skeleton he believes was that of his brother in a 10-foot-deep (three-metre-deep) pit in remote countryside alongside the remains of another man.

"There were two Ibrahims in the grave," said Shaqir, an ethnic Albanian born in Kosovo province in Serbia who spent thousands of dollars in the search.

He believes the two were killed on a CIA mission in August 1951. But the bodies have not been positively identified and U.S. officials are tight-lipped on the subject.

"I am aware of some cases of U.S. agents, some U.S. citizens, some probably not, whose bodies may be in Albania," said one U.S. official. He added that the United States has taken no action although Albanians have been searching their mountainous nation since 1990 for the remains of an estimated 1,000-10,000 political prisoners believed killed between 1944 and 1989 by the then-communist regime.

Positive identification would be difficult, though DNA tests have been used to identify decades-old human remains, according to officials of the U.S. Army's POW/MIA (prisoner of war/missing in action) recovery task force in Washington and Honolulu.

CIA spokesman David French refused comment. "Even old operational details are not normally divulged to the media," he told Reuters.

Harry Rositzke, CIA Soviet Division spy chief in Germany in the early 1950s, said, "Whatever his (Shaqir's) story is, it's certainly not inconceivable," adding that he knows of no recoveries of the bodies of former U.S. Cold War agents.

Shaqir brought back to the United States plastic-wrapped bone fragments from the two skeletons he believes were those of his brother and the other CIA agent, Ilmi Ibrahimi. The rest of the remains were reburied on August 20 in a mosque cemetery at Hamil, near the central Albanian town of Fier, he said.

The Kabashi brothers and a cousin, Ahmet Kabashi -- all from Kosovo -- were involved in a little known spy operation that paralleled a well-documented paramilitary effort by the CIA and Britain's MI6 to overthrow the Albanian communist government, he said. That operation was best known because it was betrayed by Soviet superspy Kim Philby, then MI6 liaison officer in Washington.

Ibrahim Kabashi was believed to have died while on a mission led by Ahmet after they parachuted onto a hillside near the village of Mjeshov in the Fier region. Shaqir said it was the pair's second such infiltration that summer; the first ended in failure when two other agents were killed.

Shaqir was not one of the team but said two members broke their legs in the rocky drop zone and were abandoned, perhaps killed by their colleagues to prevent capture by communist troops.

But Destan Berisha, 70, the only survivor of the mission, recalled that Ibrahim Kabashi was in fact killed later and that the second body in the grave was that of another agent.

Killing fellow agents was agreed by the Albanian emigres among themselves, and not on orders of CIA officers, who gave their agents cyanide pills, Shaqir said.

Asim Jakova, 90, an Albanian emigre who ran the Kabashis and other CIA agents in Athens, recalled reports from the June 1951 Kabashi mission, saying, "Ahmet (Kabashi) killed (a fellow agent) to stop his suffering," according to Shaqir.

Shaqir first learned of the gravesite last May from an Albanian emigre in Lynn, Massachusetts. He said when he requested State Department aid, U.S. Consul Barbara Cummings in the Albanian capital Tirana replied: "You should be aware of the potential difficulties we might face in this endeavour given the lack of expertise in this field (forensics) in Albania."

Retired British Army Colonel David Smiley, who is seeking graves of 46 English World War Two soldiers in Albania, raised the Kabashi case with Albanian President Sali Berisha and said a search by Shaqir Kabashi would prove difficult, according to Shaqir.

Despite such advice, he left the United States on August 13, and by August 17 hired a dozen Albanian villagers -- among them a gun-toting tax collector -- to dig the parched hillside.

"Those people left the story for 42 years, one to the other, and every little kid, every man, every woman, they walk there with the cows and they say, 'there are two guys buried there'," said Shaqir, referring to rural Albanians' tradition of passing on history by word of mouth.

The skeletons were uncovered on August 18, the skulls showing no bullet wounds, Shaqir said.

"I couldn't control my tears, you know, and after that I got kind of numb," he said.

Shaqir said some villagers in the region claim to have been related to some of the men who worked as U.S. agents and are hoping for a pension from the U.S. government. CIA spokesman French said the agency has received inquiries from people claiming they had relatives who died while working for the CIA during the Cold War.

But Shaqir said he was not seeking money.

"How can I ask for money? I did not go there (in the 1950s) for money," he said. "I went there to make free my country...or to die there. Not for money."

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